The Immortality of the Soul and the Origin of the Cosmos in the *Phaedo*

The *Phaedo* takes place on the last day of Socrates' life. In the dialogue Socrates defends the desirability of his own death. To persuade his two main interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes, of the goodness of death—defined as separation of soul from body—Socrates must also persuade them of the immortality of the soul. Although ultimately showing its insufficiency, Socrates initially turns to pre-Socratic natural science to show that the soul is immortal. Socrates' arguments for the immortality of the soul developing out of natural science begin with his first argument from contraries (69e-72e).[1] His discussion of his disillusionment with natural science to reveal the ultimate source of causality in the universe then follows, leading to what Socrates calls his "second sailing" (95a-102a). The "second sailing" culminates in his second argument from contraries that serves as his final "proof" for the immortality of the soul (102a-107b).

1. First Argument from Contraries: Natural Science

Socrates begins his first argument from contraries by suggesting to Cebes that they, "take a look at all things that have becoming—whether they all, as contraries, come to be from anywhere else but from their contraries, at least those that happen to have some such contrary" (70e). In considering "things that have becoming," the first argument from contraries is a turn to natural philosophy or "science."[2]

Socrates' thesis is that all things come from their contraries, and all contrary things have two becomings (71a-b). For instance, the bigger comes from the littler, which is the first becoming of the contrary, and the littler comes from the bigger, which is the second becoming of the pair. One possible explanation for what Socrates means when he argues that contraries come from their contraries, is that he is pointing to the physical causes of matter in motion.[3] This comes to light when Socrates' suggests that between a bigger and a littler thing, three mechanisms or processes can occur: "growth and decay," "separating and combining," and "cooling and heating."

Let us take Socrates' assertion of "growth and decay" occurring between bigger and littler first. If, for example, a tree grows, we can say the tree changes from being littler to being bigger, and when at some point in time the tree begins to decay, we can say that it changes from being bigger to being littler, the latter ultimately culminating in death. With respect to "separating and combining," if, for example, rain water is combined with earth, we get mud and such moisture enables a tree to grow, becoming bigger, yet if water is separated from earth we get dust or drought, which causes the tree to die, becoming "littler" or dead. Finally, with respect to "cooling and heating," if, for example, cold is added to water, we get ice, and plants die, becoming "littler," but if heat is added to ice, we get water and plants grow, becoming bigger. Socrates' suggestion, therefore, that "growth and decay," "separating and combining," and "cooling and heating" are those things that are between the bigger and the littler, appears to be a reference to the causes of matter in motion in the natural world. They explain what causes living things and non-

living things like earth, which can become mud, and water, which can become ice, to change or grow and decay, and therefore what causes them to be in motion, as it were. Socrates emphasizes that in the material world "growth and decay," or coming to be and passing away, shows that what is dead gives life to what is living. Thus, for example, a tree dies and falls to the earth. Yet, its dead matter seeps into the ground and provides nourishment for a new tree to grow, the material of the dead tree acting as a fertilizer of sorts to the new tree.[4] Moreover, Socrates suggests that this principle or action of the natural, material world can be applied to the human soul. As the matter of the dead tree nourishes a new tree, so the soul of a dead person enters the body and gives life to a new person. Thus the souls of the dead give life to the living. This shows, according to Socrates, that the souls of the living come from the souls of the dead, and thus, "it's necessary for the souls of the dead to *be* somewhere, whence they come to be again" (72a). The soul, therefore, continues to exist after the death of the body, and, "as if [it] were going in a circle," can enter into and give life to a new body (72b).[5]

There are a number of problems we should notice with Socrates' argument for the immortality of the soul based on the logic of the cycle of life in the natural world. For instance, it jumps from the motion of matter to the motion or transmigration of the soul, equating the behavior of the material with the immaterial.[6] Most interesting, however, is that although it purports to explain the *motion* of matter through "growth and decay," "separating and combining," and "cooling and heating," the first argument from contraries cannot explain the original *cause* of matter. For instance, although it may show *how* a dead tree can give life to a new tree, it cannot answer the question of *why* and

when the first tree(s) came into being, and likewise the first coming into being of things like water and earth, hot and cold. By analogy, the argument provides no answer to the question of the origin or coming into being of the first soul(s), before its/their original transmigration began.[7] These questions ultimately point to the larger issue of whether or not the cosmos is eternal or created in time. Yet, Socrates' first argument from contraries does not address this issue.

2. Second Argument from Contraries: Ideas or Forms

The second argument from contraries addresses and attempts to resolve what I have argued is the main problem with the first argument from contraries, or the argument from natural science. Although "growth and decay," "separating and combining," and "cooling and heating" can explain the *motion* of matter, or *how* things do what they do, they cannot explain the *cause* of matter, or *why* things do what they do, or in other words why things are what they are. In Socrates' second argument from contraries, the Ideas or Forms act as the cause of things in the cosmos, or explain why things come into being as what they are.

The Ideas are found in human speech, the turn to which Socrates calls his "second sailing in search of cause" (99d). Socrates characterizes his "second sailing" as turning away from the direct inquiry into "beings"—the inquiry of natural science—toward an indirect inquiry by way of studying the speeches of human beings (99d-e). According to Socrates, "it seemed to me that I should take refuge in accounts and look in them for the truth of beings"(99e). What do the speeches of human beings reveal? Socrates says to Cebes,

"I'm going to try to show you the form of the cause with which I've busied myself. And I'll go back to those much-babbled-about things and take my beginning from them, putting down as hypothesis that there's some Beautiful Itself by Itself and a Good and a Big and all the others. If you give me those and grant that they *are*, I hope, from them, to show you the cause and to discover how soul is something deathless"(100b-c). Thus, human speech, according to Socrates, reveals the Ideas.

However, the Ideas in this second argument from contraries will not act as the material or physical cause of things, but the immaterial or "intelligible" cause of things.[8] Paul Stern helps us understand the Ideas as immaterial or intelligible causes of things when he argues that an entity "is both this particular, corporeal individual and this kind of individual."[9] Stern further maintains that for Socrates, "[t]he explanation of an entity must… account both for its existence as this particular individual and this *kind* of individual."[10] Thus, a particular thing as a particular thing can have a certain color and shape and other material qualities particular to it and that are open to the senses, but it also shares this color and shape with other particular things that have the same or similar colors and shapes, such sharing making it and the others a *kind* or *class* of things, such kind or class only grasped by the mind. For example, a particular thing may have a short green stem and red petals, but having these characteristics also makes it part of a kind or "species" of things, as it were, known as flowers. Its "species" or class characteristics are its Idea, the Idea of the Flower. Taking this example one step further, the colors green and red can be part of a kind or species of things known as beautiful, thus allowing the flower to possess or participate in the Idea of the Beautiful as well. Moreover, the class

characteristics of the flower separate or distinguish it from other things with different class characteristics. For instance, a particular thing with a tall brown trunk and green leaves rather than a short green stem and red petals, has characteristics that make it part of a kind or "species" of things known as trees rather than flowers. Its "species" or class characteristics are its Idea, the Idea of the Tree.

Moreover, not only do Ideas allow us to know why things are what they are in contrast to other things, for example that a flower is a flower and not a tree, and a tree is a tree and not a flower, but they also explain why things come into being as the things that they are. For instance, a tree dies but its matter seeps into the earth providing nourishment for a new tree to come into being. But, what determines that its matter, or any other matter, produces a new tree and not a new flower? Socrates appears to suggest that the cause is the matter's participation in or possession of the Idea of the Tree. Likewise, when a flower dies and its matter seeps into the earth, it provides nourishment for a new flower because its matter participates in or possesses the Idea of the Flower. Trees come into being as trees and flowers come into being as flowers, because the matter that composes them participates in or possesses the Idea or "species" of the Tree and the Idea or "species" of the Flower.

The Ideas or Forms as the universal or class characteristics that all particular things in a class share can be considered the "intelligible" cause of things because they tell us why things come into being as they are, and why they exist as different from other things in the cosmos. The Ideas allow us to know that something is, for example, a flower rather

than a tree, beautiful rather than ugly, good rather than bad. Moreover, they allow us to name or call something a flower, beautiful, and good rather than a tree, ugly, and bad. The Ideas allow us to say that something is what it is. If there were no Ideas, or universal characteristics that particulars shared making them part of a class, something could be both a flower and a tree, beautiful and ugly, and good and bad at the same time. Things would keep changing, or matter would be in constant and chaotic, or unintelligible, motion. Speech, or naming, as well, would be meaningless, as one would call something a flower, beautiful, and good, but it would also be a tree, ugly, and bad. The Ideas, therefore, are not only the intelligible cause of things, allowing us to know what and why they are what they are, but are also the cause of rational or meaningful speech. The Ideas are not only revealed by speech, but allow speech to occur.[11]

3. Proof of the Immortality of the Soul

In the second argument from contraries, or from the Ideas as cause, Socrates provides his final and apparently conclusive "proof" for the immortality of the soul. This proof is grounded on two premises. First, unlike the first argument from contraries, or the argument from natural science, in which Socrates held that all contrary *things* or particulars come from contrary *things* or particulars, now Socrates holds that *Ideas* do *not* come from or admit of contrary *Ideas*. The Ideas are unchanging or simply are what they are; they are eternal.[12] The second premise is that Ideas are intelligible or allow themselves to be known *only* through their particular manifestations in the natural world.[13]

Keeping in mind that the Ideas appear or show themselves only in their particular manifestations, Socrates turns to the behavior of fire, snow, the numbers three and two, and the soul, particular manifestations of the Ideas of Hot, Cold, Odd, Even and Life respectively, to illustrate his contention that contrary Ideas never admit or become contrary Ideas. I will focus on fire, snow and soul, and Hot, Cold and Life. His "proof" proceeds in the following manner. Fire, which contains the Idea of the Hot, never admits the Idea of the Cold, although fire is not contrary to the Cold, the Hot is contrary to the Cold. If fire did admit the Cold, perhaps through the particular manifestation of water or snow, it would cease to be what it is, or would be extinguished. Likewise, snow, which contains the Idea of the Cold, never admits the Idea of the Hot, although it is not contrary to Hot, the Cold is contrary to Hot. If snow did admit the Hot, perhaps through the particular manifestation of fire, it would cease to be what it is, or would melt.

Socrates, after discussing fire and snow, moves on to the crucial question of the soul. Socrates suggests that the soul is not an Idea itself, but a particular manifestation of the Idea of Life whose contrary is the Idea of Death. If, as Socrates' suggests, the soul is a particular manifestation of the Idea of Life whose contrary is Death, then, following the previous pattern of argumentation, the soul, which contains the Idea of Life, will never admit the Idea of Death, although not contrary to it. Thus, Socrates appears to prove the immortality, or "un-dying" character, of the soul.

Socrates' "demonstration" of the immortality or "imperishability" of the soul based on the argument that, because it contains the Idea of Life, it never admits the Idea of Death,

is problematic when we consider more closely the behavior of snow and fire, two analogies to the soul Socrates uses to illustrate his argument.[14] Socrates argues, "[i]f it were necessary that the un-hot be imperishable as well, whenever anybody brought Hot upon snow, wouldn't snow slip away safe and unmelted? For surely it wouldn't have perished, nor again would it have endured or admitted Hotness… And in the same way, I imagine, if the uncold were imperishable as well, whenever anything cold came at fire, it would never be extinguished or perish, but would take off and go safe and sound"(106a-b). Socrates' argument in this passage is quite strange. Anyone who has lived through a raging winter knows and is glad that when the warm air of spring finally arrives, the snow does not "slip away safe and unmelted," but it melts and disappears. Likewise, when I dowse the fire in my fireplace with water, it doesn't "take off and go safe and sound," but is, hopefully, extinguished. Perhaps what Socrates means to suggest in this passage is that while a particular patch of snow may melt and therefore perish when spring comes, more snow will come again next winter. Snow itself, as a particular thing, doesn't cease to exist in the world because the Idea of the Cold, of which snow is a particular manifestation, is "un-dying" or eternal. Likewise, although a particular fire can be extinguished by dowsing it with water, we can always light another one the next evening. Fire itself, as a particular thing, will not disappear altogether from the world, because the Idea of the Hot is eternal.

What does the behavior of snow and fire imply about the soul? Perhaps a particular soul can die or "scatter," but soul itself will not disappear from the world because the Idea of Life is eternal. Thus, while the particular soul of a particular person may die, other souls

will come to be and continue to live, now and always. The second argument from contraries does not seem, therefore, to demonstrate the immortality of the *individual* soul, but rather the immortality of the cosmos in which the individual soul comes to be, lives, and then passes away. Socrates, looking to the Ideas as "cause," holds out the hope of a stable universe in which the character of human life as we know it and the natural environment of which it partakes will always exist.[15]

4. Implication for Politics

What are the implications of Socrates' first argument from contraries and its subsequent failure for politics? As we have seen, although it can explain the *motion* of matter, or *how* things do what they do, the first argument from contraries cannot explain the *cause* of matter, or *why* things do what they do, or in other words, why things are what they are. By analogy, the argument provides no account of the origin or coming into being of the first soul(s) before its/their original transmigration began. These questions ultimately point to the larger issue of whether or not the cosmos is eternal or created in time. Thus, the first argument from contraries serves to illustrate the fact that human questions, such as whether or not the soul is immortal, will inevitably turn into questions of natural science, such as why and how the cosmos came into being. Socrates, therefore, suggests that political philosophy initially cannot do without natural philosophy.[16]

Socrates' first argument from contraries, however, although pointing toward it fails to address the larger issue of the origin in time versus the eternity of the universe. Such insufficiency leads Socrates to his "second sailing in search of cause" and his subsequent

discovery of the Ideas or Forms. Yet, although the Ideas apparently show the eternity of the universe they cannot show the immortality of the individual soul, that for which politics initially began its search. As we have seen, however, the Ideas *do* make rational or meaningful speech possible. They ensure that my words, when I say, for instance, that this thing is a flower, beautiful, and good, cannot also mean that this thing is a tree, ugly, and bad. Thus, if we accept Aristotle's claim that "man is by nature a political animal" because "[he] alone among the animals has speech" which "serves to reveal … good and bad, just and unjust" (1253a2-4, 9, 14-17), then it seems that from a Socratic perspective, it is the Ideas that make such a discursive understanding and practice of politics articulated by Aristotle possible.[17] The Ideas, therefore, ground not only the cosmos but also the polis, and thus, if not able to show the fate of the individual soul in the next life, can show how it flourishes in this life.

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[1] Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, Eric Salem (Newburyport: Focus Classical Library, 1998). All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

[2] See David Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 141; Michael Davis, "Socrates' Pre-Socratism: Some Remarks on the Structure of Plato's *Phaedo*, " *Review of Metaphysics* 33:3 (March 1980): 562, 566; and C.C.W. Taylor, "Forms as Causes in the *Phaedo*," *Mind* 78:309 (January 1969): 45.

[3] But see Paul Stern, *Socratic Rationalism and Political Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Phaedo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 51, 56, 60.

[4] See Kenneth Dorter, *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 36; but see Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 54-6.

[5] But see Lloyd P. Gerson, *Knowing Persons: A Study in Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63; Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *The Death of Socrates and the Life of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 68; and Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 42-3, 52-3, 58.

[6] Davis, "Socrates' Pre-Socratism," 568.

[7] See Gerson, *Knowing Persons*, 51; Stern, *Socratic Rationalism, 55, 159*; and Davis, "Socrates' Pre-Socratism," 568.

[8] Gerson, *Knowing Persons*, 56, 93; Taylor, "Forms as Causes," 46, 50; and Paul Stern, "Antifoundationalism in Plato's *Phaedo*," *The Review of Politics* 51:2 (Spring 1989): 196, 203-205.

[9] Stern, "Antifoundationalism," 197.

[10] Ibid., 198.

[11] See Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 148.

[12] But see Ahrensdorf, *The Death of Socrates,* 175-76, 187; and Stern, *Socratic Rationalism*, 148, 153, 157-58, and "Antifoundationalism," 202.

[13] See Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 185-87, 199.

[14] See Ahrensdorf, *The Death of Socrates*, 182-83; Stern, *Socratic Rationalism*, 148, 154-55, 160-61, and "Antifoundationalism," 206; Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 189-92; and Dorter, *Plato's Phaedo,* 151-53, 157-61, 181.

[15] But see Stern, *Socratic Rationalism*, 161, and "Antifoundationalism," 204-6.

[16] See Stern, "Antifoundationalism," 201.

[17] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1984.